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**Engaging Citizens, Depoliticising Society? Training citizens as agents for good governance**

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**Abstract**

Discourses of citizenship are profoundly powerful tools both for defining membership of a national community and for establishing the expected dispositions of citizens. Governments and non-governmental organisations utilise formal and informal education to promote specific understandings of citizenship. However, efforts to promote citizenship are often marked by tensions and paradoxes in terms of content, delivery and reception of these ideals, not least in negotiating global and national, liberal and neoliberal agendas. This paper explores the rationale for and discourses of citizenship presented through a World Bank-backed on-line, transnational active citizenship training and critically interrogates the explicit and implicit ideologies and understandings of citizenship promoted in the course and certain limitations to these, including the types of 'active' citizen proposed and the normalised version of participation and civil society these reflect, and apparent limitations in relation to both state- and citizen disengagement as well as the continued challenge of promoting security through engagement across difference.

**Keywords:**

Citizenship pedagogy, difference, active citizens, responsibilisation, participation

## Introduction

Communicating of discourses of citizenship is an inherently political process (see Janmaat and Piattoeva 2007) promoting ideals and practices of 'good' citizenship through multiple citizenship education endeavours framed by (geopolitical) context, differing ideological priorities and agendas, and the targeted audiences. These efforts embody negotiations of local, national and global influences and agendas as local, national and global organisations, including civil society and non-governmental organisations, intervene within and across national borders to promote ideals of democracy, participation, civility, tolerance, peacebuilding and reconciliation (Marshall 2011; Nagel and Staeheli 2015). Underpinning these endeavours is a belief that promoting democratic citizenship will advance development outcomes and political stability (World Bank 2006). While the primary audience for many citizenship interventions are the youth, who are viewed as the hopeful future of the nation (Staeheli and Hammett 2013), efforts focussed on older generations promote citizenship participation for democratic and developmental outcomes (World Bank 2006).

This paper explores the understandings of citizen participation promoted through one transnational citizenship education intervention: the World Bank Group-backed Massive Open Online Course (MOOC), *Engaging Citizens: A Game Changer for Development*. Through analysis of course content and participant discussion, this paper critically examines how the promotion of engaged citizens – as part of a mobilised civic community – serves to further promote particular forms and practices of citizenship which potentially depoliticise civil society while rendering citizens as responsible not only *to* but *for* government conduct.

## Citizenship for development

Democratic citizenship, and education measures to develop democratic citizens, is viewed as an essential tool for development (Akar 2007; World Bank 2006). How this is realised remains a source of tension. For some, citizenship education should promote the skills needed to develop critical and creative thinkers who stand up for their rights and seek to hold governments accountable. For others, such programmes should prioritise national belonging, loyalty, conformity and the instrumental actions of good citizenship. Frequently, (citizen) education is expected to simultaneously meet these needs *and* the needs of the global economy and globalised society by developing globally competitive individuals (see Isin 2008; Janmaat and Piattoeva 2007; Marshall 2011; Staeheli and Hammett 2010).

Such tensions illustrate how citizenship remains a contested and continually reconstructed idea, informed by the incomplete negotiation of competing ideals and ideologies (see Staeheli et al. 2016). Historically, citizenship viewed as a territorially-rooted identity embedded through relationships and reciprocal commitments to governing (state) authority and fellow residents (Painter and Philo 1995). Recent interventions have sought to de-centre this focus, arguing that citizenship is experienced at multiple scales and with dynamic and shifting meanings, not simply understood as a status but also as a set of dispositions and practices (Osler and Starkey 2005), as a habitus (Isin 2008) and as emotional connection (Jackson 2015) which are encountered and (re)imagined through everyday life (for instance Coates and Garmany 2017; Ehrkamp and Leitner 2003). However, efforts to promote citizenship values, dispositions and behaviours frequently privilege state-level belonging, expressed through formal curricula, citizenship tests, media discourses and political rhetoric aimed at defining and training (good) citizens (albeit often in contradictory and incomplete ways) (Staeheli and Hammett 2010; Hammett 2014). In outlining the sought-after 'good citizen', these messages often emphasise the attributes associated with active citizens who are respectful, governable political subjects and self-disciplined as responsible, constructive members of society who productively participate in national and global labour markets and economic circulations (Hammett and Staeheli 2011; Staeheli and Hammett 2010). Citizen participation is therefore envisioned in particular ways which "commonly entail goals of social justice, economic productivity, (multi)cultural tolerance and political participation. In this sense, 'good' citizens are 'active citizens' – they contribute to the financial, physical and social well-being of the nation, participate in invited political forums (i.e. elections) and adhere to their civic duties" (Hammett 2014, 619).

These ideas remain contested by competing national and global agendas and – consequently – differing understandings of what makes someone a 'good' citizen (Mitchell 2003), as well as disparities between espoused ideals of (good) citizenship and the everyday lived realities of communities – including experiences and perceptions of both intentional and unintended mechanisms of denigration or exclusion which denigrate groups as 'undesirable', 'unproductive' or 'second class' citizens (Heller and Evans 2010, 441; also Hammett 2017). While these experiences may encourage critical, activist citizens rather than the envisioned productive, active citizens, the discursive framing of good citizenship remains rooted in expectations of (economic) productivity, (political) obedience, (active) participation and self-discipline (Hammett 2008; Staeheli and Hammett 2013).

Such ideas are reflected in the Word Bank's *2007 Development Report: Development and the Next Generation*, which argues that "youth citizenship is crucial for development outcomes" (World Bank (2006, 161). The report emphasises notions of performance society and productive citizens,

demonstrating a responsibilisation of citizens associated with a broader drift towards the neoliberalisation of citizenship and welfare policies (DeJaeghere 2013; Kennelly and Llewellyn 2011). Thus, investment in education for citizenship is justified not as a public (political) good, but in relation to a coming "age fraught with risks and laden with opportunities" within which citizens are positioned as responsible for both their own *and* the nation's wellbeing: "to succeed in today's competitive global economy, they must be equipped with advanced skills beyond literacy; to stay healthy, they must confront new disease burdens… If they remain unemployed for long periods, though, they could be a drain on the economy" (World Bank 2006, 1, 2).

Active citizens are thus characterised as neoliberal subjects who are politically obedient, skilled for participation in the globalised economy and responsible for their own – and, by extension, the nation's – wellbeing (Kennelly and Llewellyn 2011). Such developments are representative of Ong's (2006, 3) discussion of neoliberalism as a technology of governmentality, illustrated by the World Bank's *Development Report*'s concern with optimization. This focus aptly reflects Ong's (2006, 6) contention that neoliberalism is deployed through technologies of subjectivity "to induce self-animation and self-government so that citizens can optimize choices, efficiency and competitiveness in turbulent market conditions".

The spread of these ideas contributes to broader transnational circulations of *globalised* citizenship education discourses which "emphasise and promote individual responsibility as a means of finding solutions to global problems" (Hartung 2017, 17). This approach, Camicia and Franklin argue, promotes a neoliberal cosmopolitanism which envisages a global community comprised of self-motivated entrepreneurs bound together through "technologies of standardisation, surveillance and accountability" (2011, 314). Active citizenship is thus framed by discourses of responsibility and duty to the state; citizens are expected to be "responsible *to* the state and self-regulating so as to lessen the claims made *upon* the state" (Kennelly and Llewellyn 2011, 906).

Critics of these framings of *globalised* citizenship education (informed by market-based thinking and the responsibilisation of citizens) highlight that neoliberal cosmopolitanism ignores structural forms of injustice and exclusion (Balarin 2011), locating individual citizens as having agency to overcome these barriers provided they take responsibility for *both* their personal welfare and development *and* for the development of the country's economy and democratic good governance. In contrast, advocates of *global* citizenship education emphasise human-rights and emphasise empowerment to promote global belonging rooted in social justice, development and growth that are sensitive towards distant others (Niens and Reilly 2012). Positioned in opposition to exclusionary forms of nationalist citizenship and rooted in ideals of "social justice and an ethics of recognition" (Camicia

and Franklin 2011, 314) *global* citizenship education draws upon a 'critical democratic cosmopolitanism' with a concern to recognise and address structural inequalities and promote a trans-national sense of solidarity and identity which draws upon an awareness of externalities and responsibilities to distant others (Niens and Reilly 2012; Massey 2004). This approach is viewed as a key strategy for reducing inequality and preventing or reducing conflict through tolerance and reconciliation (see Akar 2007; Niens and Reilly 2012; Staeheli and Hammett 2010, 2013). However, critics caution that Western discourses of *global* citizenship education and democratic cosmopolitan citizenship remain "blind to historical power inequalities embedded in global issues and international relations" (Andreotti and Pashby 2013, 422) and can have a homogenising effect and promote an "imagined consensus" (Camicia and Franklin 2011, 311) of *a* global citizenship (Niens and Reilly 2012).

The continued negotiation of global and globalised education discourses within national education curricula intersect with continued tensions over the purpose of education and a perceived shift from valuing the intrinsic importance of education (for developing critically informed citizens) towards instrumental educational outcomes linked to productivity and the responsbilisation of active citizens (Kennelly and Llewellyn 2011). These concerns are situated within broader negotiations of liberal (understood as linked to Western democracy and rooted in T.H. Marshall's work on liberal citizenship and associated emphasis on civil, political and social rights) and neoliberal (understood as the drift towards market rationality and the prioritising of the self-motivated and self-regulated individual) citizenship discourses (see Carney 2009). Consequently, citizens are expected to simultaneously enact civic responsibilities to promote and entrench democracy, while becoming "active stakeholders in a system that requires a mixture of consumer activism campaigning for good governance, challenging market or government failings as well as promoting world peace" (Arnot and Swartz 2012, 2; also Andreotti and Pashby 2013; Carney 2009; DeJaeghere 2013; Hartung 2017; Marshall 2011). The discursive practices associated with these efforts legitimatise certain spaces and actions of citizenship, while delegitimising alternative, potentially disruptive sites and acts of citizenship. Good citizenship is thus linked with forms of citizen engagement focussed on compliance and the undertaking actions of citizenship, and contrasted to civic dissent and 'uncivil' citizenship acts (Kennelly and Llewellyn 2011; Staeheli and Hammett 2010; Quaynor 2015).

**Whose version of citizenship?**

Contested and contradictory policies and curricula continue to frame these efforts to promote good citizenship however (Camicia and Franklin 2011; Staeheli and Hammett 2010). These tensions arise

from efforts “to combine political concerns for democratization and rights with concerns for efficiency and value for money” as key – and often juxtaposed – priorities (Carney 2009, 68), resulting in a policy focus on “participation in the global market economy instead of political and civic life, and self-improvement in contrast to the common good” (DeJaeghere 2013, 504). Informing these policies are both national political and socio-economic concerns as well as the transnational communication of citizenship ideals, and development and good governance agendas.

The transnational promotion of ideals of citizenship, good governance and democracy has occurred for decades, manifest through various media and broadcast platforms (Jeffrey and Staeheli 2015; Staeheli et al. 2016). During the Cold War, efforts to promote democracy in Community controlled and influenced regions included US Government-funded radio stations such as Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Radio Marti, and Voice of America. Such practices continue today, with Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty broadcasting to 23 countries (in 26 languages) including the Balkans, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan and the Crimea, and new radio platforms including Radio Free Asia, Radio Alhurra and Radio Sawa established with a goal of developing well-informed citizens who can promote and support democratisation processes. Within Europe, the Council of Europe’s campaign for Education for Democratic Citizenship has sought to foster active and critical citizenship and overcome tensions between promoting active democratic citizenship and nation-building (Janmaat and Piattoeva 2007).

These practices demonstrate a continuation of previous democratisation promotion efforts and underscore the central role envisaged for civil society within the good-governance turn in the 1990s (Jeffrey 2007, 2008; Mercer and Green 2013; Nagel and Staeheli 2015). These efforts seek to simultaneously realise multiple outcomes of democratisation (and associated civic participation), good governance (in which citizens and civil society play a vital monitoring role) and free-market economic development (in which citizens are skilled to participate in the globalised economy) (see Nagel and Staeheli 2015, 225).

The range of platforms for such practices is increasing as new media and technology provide trans-territorial access to citizen education and other materials (Carney 2009; Hartung 2017). Amongst early efforts to provide on-line educational materials for development purposes was the African Virtual University (AVU), founded in Kenya in 1997 with funding from the World Bank. Envisaged as a crucial platform for skills development and enhancing economic productivity, the online nature of AVU was anticipated as a mechanism for overcoming barriers linked to distance, cost and access to educational institutions or other learning hubs (Amutabi and Oketch 2003; Valentin 2015). Indeed, since 1997 there has been a dramatic expansion of online educational spaces, including those

orientated towards global and globalised citizenship education. The justification for these platforms is a belief that while education is key for development the state has failed to promote citizens "able to take responsibility for a plethora of global challenges in 'uncertain times'" (Hartung 2017, 16). In response, online resources are presented as a cost-effective means for providing education and training in support of development outcomes by multilateral agencies and civil society organisations.

Concerns persist about the suitability of such endeavours and the extent to which these platforms replicate instrumental, neoliberal conceptions of citizenship and development (see Hartung 2017). For example, from its launch the AVU was treated with "suspicion since the Bank is the principal source of neo-liberal policy models imposed on developing countries often presented as doctrinal truths" (Amutabi and Oketch 2003, 57). These concerns remain prominent due to the replication and convergence of Western development ideals through circulations of policy ideologies and technocrats (Mercer and Green 2013, 106). While these messages may be interpreted and reworked by recipients based upon local context and experience (Jeffrey and Staeheli 2015; Pykett 2010), the transnational mobility of ideas and discourses of good citizenship and good governance results in the privileging of Western ideology and continued colonisation of political thought (Wainaina, Arnot and Chege 2011; Spiegel et al. 2016)

This paper explores the rationale for and discourses of citizenship presented through one trans-national e-training course, *Engaging Citizens: A Game Changer for Development*. The next section provides a brief outline of the course and its content, with subsequent sections exploring the ways in which citizenship, and citizen engagement in particular, is constructed and presented through the course. Specifically, consideration is given to the types of active citizen proposed and normalised versions of participation and civil society reflected in these framings which can be understood as partial and problematic.

**Engaging citizens**

Formal and informal educational materials are employed to promote (democratic) citizenship ideals within and across state borders. Recent advances in communication technologies have underpinned a rapid expansion in availability – and ease of access – of these materials, providing competing understandings of citizenship; some exclusionary and regressive, some progressive and inclusionary, some formal and structured, some informal and ad hoc. The expansion of on-line distance learning opportunities, including the proliferation of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), provides one set of tools through which major organisations promote citizenship, democracy and development.

Targeted at a range of audiences, from those with seeking formally recognised qualifications to those with a general or professional interest, MOOCs have emerged as an important source of transnational education and knowledge. Such platforms are heralded by proponents as "having the potential to radically transform higher education", while being critiqued for having little direct relevance to non-Western contexts and suffering from a uniformity of developmental messaging (Speigel et al. 2016, 3).

Amongst the larger MOOC providers, Coursera is a for-profit educational technology company headquartered in California, USA with (in late 2015) 15 million registered users. Coursera works with various Universities[1], major professional associations, civil society organisations, think tanks and multinational agencies (including the US Department of State) to provide online courses in physical and social sciences, the humanities and other fields. In addition to their basic courses (costing between $29 and $99), users can pay $250 to $500 for a specialization course or $15,000 to $25,000 for a university-recognised degree in data science, computer science or business.[2]

Coursera's *Engaging Citizens: A Game Changer for Development?* MOOC attracted 11,700 participants in 2015.[3] Developed by the World Bank Group in conjunction with the London School of Economics, the Overseas Development Institute, Participaedia, and CIVICUS, the course was advertised as being of interest "Whether you are a policymaker, civil society leader, business owner, student, or an interested citizen". Participants on the course were promised "a deep understanding of citizen engagement in the context of development", with course content and assessments tailored to this outcome. *Engaging Citizens* was marketed as providing participants with access to world leading expertise and knowledge, with course materials provided via the Coursera web-platform including video lectures, quizzes, core and additional readings, links to other materials, and on-line discussion forums. Participants were encouraged to engage with course leaders and other participants through a number of Google hangouts, and via Twitter (#CitizensEngage). To gain the course certificate participants needed to complete weekly quizzes (points were gained for correct responses to multiple choice questions), a peer-marked short answer document (with additional points awarded for carrying out peer marking submissions), plus a final project assignment.

Over a 4-week period *Engaging Citizens* covered a range of concepts through video lectures plus core and additional readings. Course content covered the question of "Citizen engagement: what it is and why it matters" before addressing weekly themes of "Engaging citizens for improved policy

[1] Including John Hopkins University, University of California (San Francisco), London School of Economics, and the University of Edinburgh.
[2] Coursera offers a financial aid scheme to those who are unable to meet the course fees.
[3] In 2015 many courses, including this one, were offered for free.

making", "Can engaging citizens bring better services", and "Innovations in citizen engagement". Participants were expected to develop understandings of the historic development of citizen engagement and awareness of different forms of engagement, including tactical and strategic as well as thick and thin forms of engagement, and the importance of socio-political contexts for enabling or hindering such practices. Participants were also presented with ideas about how citizens could engage with policy making, the possibility of crowd-sourcing to assist with these engagements, and the challenges of barriers to inclusive participation. From this, participants were then introduced to different understandings of government-citizen relations and the ways in which citizens could "serve as active agents of, rather than passive recipients in, the delivery of public services". This content addressed ideas of short- and long-routes to accountability and the importance of information for informed participation, decision-making and for ensuring service-provider accountability. Finally, content focussed on the potential role of ICTs in supporting development – especially amongst marginalised populations – with a particular focus on promoting accountability and enhancing feedback and inclusivity of government.

For each theme, a short series of video lectures presented key terminology, debates and ideas, including case studies to provide deeper insight into the concepts. These were supported by readings from both academic and grey literatures. Participants were encouraged to identify with one of two 'course tracks', the first being 'Citizen Engagement Champion' and aimed at those with a general interest, and the second being 'Policy and Leadership' which was aimed at those wanting greater practical experience to launch real-world initiatives. Across both tracks, key objectives focussed on developing understandings of the theoretical foundations for citizen engagement, the role of citizens in promoting good governance, and developing capacity to evaluate the effectiveness of citizen engagement initiatives.

The core materials were presented by a range of contributors including nine drawn from relevant teams within the World Bank Group (primarily the Governance Global Practice Team), six academics, one civil service/government representative, one representative from a donor/development institute and six representatives of civil society. Participants were drawn from across the globe, and discussions board postings identified participants from every continent except Antarctica. These postings also evidenced that many were current NGO or civil society workers and volunteers, alongside a significant proportion of university students. Others identified themselves as consultants, civil servants, and interested citizens.

The data drawn on here derive from participation as a registered user on the course and immersion in the associated on-line activities. All research activities were subject to ethical review and

conducted in line with existing internet-research ethics guidelines, based upon the understanding that it is permissible to observe and analyse what takes place in public spaces without the need for informed consent providing data is presented anonymously (Sveningsson 2004). Materials were collated and coded to allowed for discourse analysis to identify key issues and trends in both the education material and discussion board postings relating to examples of discourse as social practice and as expressions of power relations. This process facilitated the exploration of the structures of meaning being presented and the processes through which discourses and knowledges of (good) citizenship were presented and received. Social media content, such as that linked to the promoted #CitizensEngage, were not collected.

Although *Engaging Citizens* was labelled as focussing on development (with citizen engagement was positioned as a "game changer for development") there are some clear limitations (including the digital divide) to the use of such platforms for promoting engaged citizenship, particularly in the global south (see Graham 2011). Limits to reliable internet access were a clear issue for participants who noted challenges of limited bandwidth or restrictive data usage caps to watching or downloading data-heavy multimedia content. Such concerns resonate with broader critiques of how proponents of digital democracy often overlook structural inequalities of access and the uneven realisation of benefits from such programmes (Andreotti and Pashby 2013; Spiegel et al. 2016; Valentin 2015). Access to the MOOC also assumed a certain level of both technical and English language literacy, with the use of academic and technical terminology noted as a potentially exclusionary issue in several discussion threads. While a Senior Governance Specialist at the World Bank recognised that "technology can also act to exclude the poorest and most marginalized groups. Access is an issue…. Literacy is a key issue" for citizen engagement there was no reflection on these issues in relation to the accessibility of course.

**Rationalising citizen engagement**

The importance of an informed and active citizenry for development features prominently in World Bank (2006) documents and is reiterated in *Engaging Citizens*. The opening materials of the MOOC illustrate how globalised citizenship education and the good governance agendas intersect to promote a particular view how good citizens should behave and participate in support of social, economic and political development.

Presuming that democracy is essential for development, contributors to the MOOC's video lectures argued that citizen engagement is vital for improving development outcomes,

> "Around the world, we've seen that when citizens are engaged, when they participate, they can improve policymaking and service delivery by governments" (a Vice President in the World Bank Group).

The intimated challenge was of a need to (re)invigorate communities and turn residents into active citizens and participants, as two other expert contributors suggested in their video lectures,

> "Citizen engagement is very important for strengthening governance processes and for deepening democracy… Citizen engagement is important because it helps to create citizens… People have to learn about those rights [of citizenship], people have to learn their skills to make a difference. And how do you learn that? You learn by starting with engagement." (Professorial Fellow)

> "Citizen Engagement should not be thought of as new and optional tool. Rather, it is an ancient concept with a long history, and should be considered both an obligation for legitimate governments, and as a hallmark of good citizenship" (Senior Specialist in the World Bank Group).

Going further, a former Team Lead at the World Bank Group argued that engaged citizens provide legitimation for governments, who "derive their authority and power from the people". However, the key concern was not with government but with governance: the MOOC's webpages spoke of promoting active participation and engagement as a mechanism for

> "putting citizens at the center of governance… [to] fundamentally alter the relationship between the government and the governed. Ultimately, citizen engagement is essential for governance that works for everyone".

Citizens are thus placed at the 'center of governance', understood not solely as subjects of government but as agents promoting and policing practices of good governance. These ideals are entrenched within the course's approach from the outset, as outlined by one expert contributor,

> "citizen engagement could be incredibly important for making a difference on development issues such as service delivery, water, education, healthcare, all those sectoral things. Citizen engagement is very important for strengthening governance processes and for deepening democracy" (Professorial Fellow).

However, these discussions remained relatively a-geographical. While the course noted how socio-political contexts were influential in facilitating or hindering citizen engagement, "citizen engagement is highly embedded in the nature of the political and governance context and in existing

power relations, or the local context" (former Team Lead in World Bank Group), critical reflections on these concerns were infrequent. Although several examples of citizen engagement from the global south were presented, course content struggled to reflect on relevant contextual factors and the complexities inherent in replicating such practices elsewhere. To illustrate, the former Team Lead followed on from their comment above to note examples of citizen engagement in Brazil, Uganda and Indonesia. The brevity of the remarks for each example rendered these as interesting but partial vignettes and reflected both a broader challenge of presenting of decontextualized views of what good governance means and its universal applicability, and an imposed homogenised view of how and why citizens *should* engage and to what end. Thus, the ideals of citizen engagement framing the MOOC are linked to a particular and partial understanding of good citizenship as linked to the active promotion of good governance agendas and responsibility not only *to* the state but *for* the state.

**Engagement and governance: participation and responsibility**

This linking of citizenship, governance and development are a continuation of the good governance agenda of the 1990s, from which two critical issues emerge. The first relates to the impacts on communities arising from growing demands for (citizen) participation in development projects. The second is the discursive linking of participation and responsibility, and resultant framing of good citizens as responsible for their own wellbeing *and* for the wellbeing of the body politic. In other words, of good citizens as responsible both *to* the government and *for* governance practices.

The participatory turn of the 1990s identified citizen engagement as vital for development and democracy building efforts (see Williams 2004). Drawing on the ideas of Robert Chambers, whose works argued for the privileging and empowering of marginal voices through participatory processes which put 'the first last' and ensured that the reality of the poor and marginalised 'counted' (Chambers 1997), advocates of this approach argued that prioritising participation would ensure marginal groups were heard and that local communities would have greater ownership over development projects (World Bank 2001). However, extensive critiques noted technical limitations and power dynamics as key barriers to realising participation (Cooke and Kothari 2001). Despite these concerns, participation remains a key tool for promoting development (Hickey and Mohan 2004; Williams 2004) and a key behaviour associated with good citizenship agendas. Several of the expert contributors to the MOOC highlighted participation and engagement as key tools for development, with a Vice President within the World Bank Group arguing that "if we want to solve the many social, political, economic and environmental challenges we face, we need to take into

account the knowledge, experiences, views and values of the people most directly facing these challenges".

Many MOOC participants viewed the course was a platform to develop skills and ideas for promoting participation towards good governance and democratisation. Participants' introductions noted hopes that "This course is going to help me a lot as it is going to improve my engagement of citizens in our organization's developmental and humanitarian work" (Zimbabwean participant), expectations of "engaging with the community and mobilising them to demanding for accountability from Government and to deliver on their promises" (Nigerian participant), and one who noted that "The Kenyan Constitution emphasizes the concept of public participation but does not lay out the guide on its implementation… This platform will provide an opportunity for me to have a better understanding of how to deal with the challenges as well as make the process of public participation better and of benefit to the citizens (Kenyan participant).

Despite these pronouncements towards participation for development and citizenship, more critical conversations on the discussion forum raised critical questions relating to power and privilege, be these in terms of who is able to speak and who is listened to or the broader concern around the de-politicising potential of participation (see Williams 2004). These concerns grew from prosaic concerns with research-fatigue within communities, distrust towards donors and governments rhetoric of participation, the direct and indirect financial costs of participation (from travel costs to lost income from subsistence livelihood activities), and issues of accessibility (in terms of language, transport, time) (see also Lemanski 2017). These concerns, and the contradictions within donor rhetoric and policy, were summarised by one South African participant,

> "Most funders (especially PEPFAR and the Global Fund) do not permit expenditure on food, T Shirts, etc. in the project budget – and most local NGOs operate on very low budgets so it is hard to see how this will be financed. At another level, in the areas that some of the projects I know operate in – people have long walks to get to meetings and refreshments should be provided… The truth is that in many areas, researchers, developers and government officials come and go in these communities but there is very little benefit to the community in real terms."

Another contributor noted how local communities in the Asia-Pacific region were expected to be involved in a development project that had

> "no budget for mobilization – because for the poorest, missing person hours on looking for food to attend a meeting is already a huge sacrifice… How can one first for democracy or

> capacity building be processed is the stomach is grumbling or one worries that ones family do not have a meal?"

Elsewhere, two Kenyan participants noted how communities often resisted calls for participation due to distrust in government and due to government officials "not giving information in time, others are not present in office and others do not want to participate in any process because according to them, they are not benefitting in any way and majority say government in corrupt" (Kenyan participant). These concerns reflect experiences of international donor efforts to promote participation for development and democratisation which have mobilised *some* communities while (re)entrenching social stratification and two-tiered citizenship experiences (Lemanski 2017).

Similar concerns expressed in a series of posts by contributors from Haiti, Brazil, Mexico and Zimbabwe (respectively),

> "Today, my country faces some difficulties (political, economic, corruption, etc…) as results the Haitian youth doesn't believe in any positive changes. They prefer [to] give [be given development aid] than faces the problem".
>
> "my country's youth do not want to engage in the country political life. I think this is due to the sad situation we are going through, with a lot of corruption in the public sector",
>
> "young people don't usually stop and consider the possibility of actually being able to do something about their issues/social problems",
>
> "the problems which youths face (lack of empowerment and resources, unemployment, 'voicelessness', among others…) are made worse because in most for it is the adults who speak for the youths".

While the MOOC addressed some of these concerns, the key message remained of participation as vital for citizenship and development outcomes, and this engagement was a responsibility of good citizens. This discursive framing risks participation becoming depoliticised through a framing of power relations and discourses of governmentality and citizenship. Rather than locating opportunities for participation as a space for political struggle and the realisation of rights (Williams 2004), *Engaging Citizens* promoted a narrower view participation linked to responsiblised citizenship and disconnected from critical political engagements.

Thus, the MOOC focussed on the ideal social compact that within democratic societies, "citizens have both the right and the responsibility to demand accountability and to ensure that government

acts in the best interests of the people… [who have the right] to define the public good, determine policies by which they seek the good, and reform or replace institutions that do not serve that good" (former World Bank team leader). Moreover, this right was also the *responsibility* of citizen engagement, so that citizens would carry out activities intended to hold governments accountable.

However, various participants expressed concerns with this agenda, questioning the viability of the responsbilisation of citizens when governments lacked the capacity and willingness to constructively respond to issues raised by citizens. This was alluded to by one participant from Jamaica, who reflected on service scorecards for accountability and good governance,

> "I watched a crowd chasing a pickpocket and realized that the man closest to the pickpocket was interfering with the others chasing. He was an accomplice. I feel that way about the scorecard. I spent six months trying to get answers as to why a citizen was denied water… Let's hire competent people before talking about scorecards."

Concerns with structural weaknesses and systemic issues were largely sidelined within the MOOC, with emphasis remaining on the responsibility of citizens, communities and governments to cooperate to deliver on development priorities. Thus, the dominant narrative was of responsibility: of citizens to be responsible *to* the state (a focus on actions of citizenship and scant discussion of invented spaces of participation and acts of citizenship (see Cornwall 2002; Isin 2008)), of government officials to be responsible *for* listening and responding to citizen' engagements, and of citizens to be responsible *for* the state (as part of a civil society efforts to monitor government projects, carry out social audits or budgetary monitoring, to promote both government and governance). Underlying this approach was a specific understanding of the repertoire of responsible actions – or forms of participation – that could be undertaken.

This messaging is framed by broader World Bank (2006) policies which prioritise citizen engagement for accountability as a feature of citizenship education. During the MOOC, one expert contributor (a Lead Specialist at the World Bank Group), indicated that citizen engagement was reducible to accountability, rendering the terms social accountability (rooted in an understanding of accountability as "the extent and capability of citizens to hold the state accountable and make it responsive to their needs") and citizen engagement as interchangeable within the MOOC. Layered on to this intersection of accountability and citizenship were specific narratives of 'approved' forms of participation to ensure accountability. These forms of participation were primarily formal, invited spaces of participation – elections, consultations, formal reporting and complaints procedures – and certain sanctioned invented spaces of participation such as community budget monitoring activities.

These actions and activities of good citizen engagement were tacitly juxtaposed with disruptive forms of engagement.

Thus, while expert contributions noted how citizen engagement includes both "invited spaces that are facilitated by or with decision makers (such as government) and engagement that occurs in 'popular' spaces, such as protests and social movements", presentations focused on particular, non-disruptive spaces of participation. This tendency was illustrated in one expert's observation that

> "Growing dissatisfaction with the effectiveness of elections in channelling citizen voice and engagement has led to increased reliance on other, perhaps more interactive mechanisms of engagement, based on increased dialogue, collaboration and participatory decision-making among a diverse set of stakeholders, including both within civil society and the state".

Here, and elsewhere in the course, invented spaces of participation were identified as spaces of dialogue and collaboration, rather than spaces of dissent or claims-making.

Through this discursive positioning of what constitutes (accepted) invented spaces of engagement, the MOOC presents a narrative that repositions civil society and citizens in relation to governance and participation, thereby altering the nature and purpose of the public sphere. Central to this process is a rejection of civil society as a critical opponent to the state; civil society is repositioned as less confrontational and more cooperative with the state. This shift is not envisaged simply in terms of providing support for service delivery, but fundamentally working more closely with the state. Consequently, a tension emerges between calls for civil society and engaged citizens to become more responsible and active as watchdogs for good governance, and calls for civil society to be more supportive of and to work in collaboration with government. Thus, we see how citizen engagement is positioned as citizens accepting responsibility to support government development agendas, to act as a critical check for governance failures, but not to act as critical opponents to government.

**Engaging (in) activities of citizenship**

This approach to citizen engagement is self-limiting (dependent upon a responsive state) and demonstrates efforts to promote specific practices (actions) of active citizenship in keeping with the globalised citizen approach outlined earlier. Throughout the MOOC, engaged citizens are understood as those who are active but not activist, who accept a responsibility to work in collaboration with government to ensure both good governance and development outcomes. This discourse of engaged citizens embodies a form of governmentality deploying globalised citizenship education to construct expectations around the role of citizen(ship) for development. In essence, the content of

the MOOC reflects the World Bank's (2006, 160) broader visions of active citizens as "individuals [who] should hold public officials accountable for their actions, demand justice for themselves and others, tolerate people who are ethnically or religiously different, and feel solidarity with their fellow citizens and human beings". This conceptualisation implies a soft form of active citizenship, a set of beliefs and behaviours that seek to mitigate but not challenge inequality and inequity (Hartung 2017).

The operationalisation of these ideas through the MOOC went beyond promoting actions of citizenship (to utilise Isin's (2008, 2012) terminology) to focus on service delivery realisation and the promotion of good governance. The suggested use of mechanisms for engagement outside of formal electoral cycles, such as social audits and budgetary monitoring, remained largely formalised, invited spaces of cooperative participation. Potentially disruptive spaces of engagement and participation were marginalised and delegitimised by exclusion from the substance of the course, while the assumption was made that governments would not only have the capacity to deal with, but also welcome and respond to sanctioned forms of citizen engagement. Across the discussion boards, however, participants expressed frustrations both with experiences of non-responsive government bodies *and* the lack of content focussed on these concerns.

The focus on permitted and sanctioned spaces and forms of participation within the MOOC underscored an approach to citizen engagement as being a positive contributor for development only if it was enacted in civil ways. One participant, picking up on this issue, noted how course materials recognised that

> "sometimes civic engagement is not straightforward nor is it peaceful. I would argue that it is not engagement in the sense that those who endorse civic engagement mean it to be – a two-way dialogue between citizens and state. Marches and protests are still a form of engagement though, in the sense that citizens who have gotten fed up of hearing the same things, been given lip service, have been submitted to injustice etc turn on the ruling regimes in these more violent forms of engagement".

However, the characterising of marches and protests as 'violent forms of engagement' is suggestive of the implied delegitimisation within the MOOC of such un-invited and potentially disruptive forms of engagement. This resonates with the World Bank's 2007 Development Report's (2006, 9) statement that "Without opportunities for productive civic engagement, young people's frustrations may boil over into violent behaviour and lead to economic and social instability, sparks that can ignite long-simmering disputes". It fails, however, to adequately consider the realities of governance landscapes across the world where citizens feel (actively) marginalised and the reality of growing

civic disengagement from traditional forms of participation (see Hammett 2008). Thus, while expert contributors to the MOOC outlined a raft of engagement practices including constitution-making processes, budget monitoring, citizen report cards and participatory planning, these mechanisms assume not only the willingness of communities to participate, but also they trust governments to listen and respond constructively.

These advocated practices sit between the actions and acts of citizenship proposed by Isin (2008, 2012); they are 'soft acts' wherein some can be positioned as rights-claiming activities and could be exercised in tension with the state, but are simultaneously actions expected of globalised neoliberal citizens who engage and participate with the aim of realising good governance. Fundamentally, these activities are always non-disruptive and with efforts to minimise any critical or oppositional realities. The engaged citizen, then, is one who utilises (civil) activities of globalised citizenship to enact their responsibilities (to themselves, and both to and for the state) in the pursuit of development. These engaged citizens are, by inference, not expected to be – indeed are discouraged from being – critically engaged: their responsibility is to work towards good governance, and not to critically engage or challenge governments, governmentality and the structural causes and outcomes of inequality and social injustice.

MOOC content clearly seeks to position citizens and civil society in specific, non-oppositional relations with the state. Thus, one expert contributor – a senior figure within the World Bank – argued that civil society and, de facto, engaged citizens should be positioned to support and collaborate with the state rather than as a separate sector acting as a check upon government and power, calling for participants to "rethink the assumption that government and citizens are necessarily in opposition to each other— that governments want to be secretive and closed, and that citizens inherently distrust their governments" and "to shift our mindset from competition to collaboration" (see Hammett 2013; Lewis 2002). This framing of citizens, civil society and state relations was reaffirmed by another World Bank contributor who argued that "Citizen engagement is not the state against citizens or citizens against the state. Many citizen engagement approaches focus on building supportive pro-accountability networks across 'state' and 'society'". These sentiments were further echoed by an expert contributor from global civil society who advocated "changing the nature of that conversation so that it's more meaningful, that it's about cooperation and dialogue, and not just about advocacy or confrontation".

These efforts not only continue to position civil society as a key implementation partner for development (see UNDP 2008) but, crucially, to render citizens and civil society a-critical, de-politicised actors who accept and enact their responsibilities for both themselves and for good

governance. Such outcomes reflect broader Western development and democratisation agendas which seek to promote liberal democracy *and* a neoliberal economic agenda (Hickey 2002). Problematically, this universalised approach assumes a homogeneity of contextual factors, practices of government, conditions of citizenship and applicability of civil society as a concept and entity. The failings of this assumption were rapidly exposed through testimonies by MOOC participants who noted challenges posed by power asymmetries and governmental opposition to civil society and engaged citizens. For instance, one participant observed how "the minute you want to make such suggestions to Government, they will label you an opposition party" and another who identified that "In most developing countries, where civic space is politically polarised, any attempt to engage communities on developmental projects as long as it does not come from the ruling party is viewed with suspicion and would be quickly squashed". These testimonies expose the limitations of both constrained political contexts but also the efforts to position civil society as a manageable and supportive sector for development while marginalising critics and dissent (Rombouts 2006).

**A space for critical engagement?**

The pitch and framing of content, as well as the language used and complexities of concepts presented, suggest that the MOOC was primarily aimed at civil society actors and activists. Consequently, we can understand the MOOC as an avenue to encourage the professionalization of civil society, as well as the agendas of good governance and democratisation (see also Baillie Smith and Laurie 2011; Jeffrey 2012; Nagel and Staeheli 2015). A critical reading of the MOOC suggests this platform could be understood as contributing to the 'gentrification of civil society' (Jeffrey 2012) and concomitant "conflation of a particular form of governance (i.e., governance through community) with the development and functioning of an autonomous public sphere" (Nagel and Staeheli 2015, 227). With this gentrification comes the risk of depoliticisation of civil society and closing down for critical and activist ways of engaging with governments, as captured in the issue raised by Nagel and Staeheli (2015, 228) that "while promoting active citizen participation and empowerment, they [NGOs] may discourage the dissent that might lead to more substantive political changes".

Within the MOOC, these efforts to frame civil society and engaged citizens in specific ways to promote good governance while discouraging dissent and critical practices were clearly evident. At the same time, however, some of the expert contributors noted and lamented the "increasingly restrictive legal and regulatory environments for civil society... restrictions on fundamental freedoms of assembly and association; we're seeing crackdowns on dissent; surveillance of civil society actors" and called for a "fight back [against] this new restrictive environment". However, the spaces and

practices of engagement being promoted within the MOOC were themselves less oppositional and less critical, and called upon civil society to work *with* not *against* the state. This approach clearly resonates chime with Nagel and Staeheli's (2015) concern with the declining possibilities for critical engagements which could deliver more sustained and substantive change.

The MOOC promotes a soft form of citizen engagement. Instead of providing foundations for engaged citizens to interrogate and challenge structural inequalities and power imbalances, a normative approach is presented wherein the engaged citizen is one who undertakes civil activities – rather than actions or acts – in the name of good governance. Certainly, the content of the MOOC does little to address "concerns about the homogenising effects of online learning" (Spiegel et al. 2016, 3), instead further evidencing "the neoliberal turn in education as a whole… [and] a move away from the idea of education as a public good and instead seen as a training source for a market-driven economy" (Bose 2014, 30; also Amutabi and Oketch 2003). Throughout the MOOC, while there is a repeated mantra that 'one size does not fit all', the course suffered from a common issue in global citizenship content, of overlooking "how the harsh material realities in which marginalised citizens live shape their imagination of citizenship in ways that often contradict the ideals of the global citizen" (Balarin 2011, 355). In this instance, however, the ideals were not of the global (critical cosmopolitan) citizen, but the globalised, responsibilised citizen. Thus, the MOOC continued a "focus on changing individual attitudes – on agency – [which] in turn hinders full consideration of the changing nature of global social and political structures and how they impinge on the institution of citizenship" (Balarin 2011, 357) and struggled to identify and communicate strategies to engage in contexts lacking the institutionalised openness and support for formalised, invited forms of engagement.

The MOOC's efforts to promote citizen engagement for development can be understood as re-instilling an understanding of engaged citizens and civil society as "cogs in a neoliberal wheel, as the 'little platoons' in the shape of (local) voluntary and faith-based associations in the service of neoliberal goals" (Mercer and Green 2013, 107). The training provided in the *Engaging Citizens* privileges the good governance agenda and reflects the shift in positionality of civil society in development policy from being service delivery partners for citizens, to working *with* citizens in "roles of accountability, public service monitoring and community engagement" to ensure governments are "rendering public provision more effective through policy engagement, advocacy and ensuring accountability" (Mercer and Green 2013, 107, 113). Not only do these efforts reflect dominant development policy approaches, they demonstrate how politically-rooted ideals around governance and democracy are transposed across national borders. A further danger of these practices, often framed in terms of professionalising civil society, is that they de-cosmopolitanise

spaces of engagement through the imposition of "an elite, instrumental and neoliberal cosmopolitanism whose apparent universalism betrays its Western origins" (Baillie Smith and Jenkins 2011, 168).

Such practices frequently fail to critically engage with the underlying structural factors informing how and why civil society and citizens may (not) engage – and the ways in which they would do this – within different contexts. The *Engaging Citizens* MOOC is no exception, overlooking key questions that effective critical global citizenship education (and engagement) must focus on, namely the underlying causes of inequality, poverty and social injustice (Andreotti and Pashby 2013). The resultant soft form of citizenship education and engagement is one in which modernity is to be universally achieved but without thinking critically about underlying structural constraints and issues (Andreotti and Pashby 2013; Mikander 2016). Furthermore, in seeking to develop such a singular view of engagement and participations, this approach may unintentionally marginalise grassroots activists and alternative forms of activist engagement and rights-claiming acts (Baillie Smith and Jenkins 2011, 168; Isin 2008).

The relative lack of engagement with structural issues underpinning social injustice and development barriers was noted on the discussion threads. While many posts lamented corruption or political leaders who were focused on self-aggrandisement, limited attention was paid to critically reflecting on the structural components of poverty. In a few places, participants noted how inequalities in access to technology or education limited who could participate and how effectively they could do so (in the course and more broadly). Buried in the middle of one discussion, however, one participant gestured towards these concerns, "the root causes of injustice and inequality still remain and until there is a new vision of what it means to be human, a willingness to really interrogate existing institutions, political courage, a humility and a desire in my view to come back to basics all the internet in the world can't change this". Elsewhere, another argued that "The blind truth is that in developing countries the underlying power dynamics are very much in existence, one cannot expect the vulnerable to be the ones to break the shackles and speak and cry for demands, jeapordizing everything that they have".

While these posts are powerful, the lack of sustained engagement with such questions within the MOOC indicates a vision of engaged citizenship with limited emphasis on critical engagement with structural concerns. In their analysis of the World Bank's conceptualisation of youth citizens, Wainaina, Arnot and Chege (2011, 182) succinctly argue that they are positioned as "as stakeholders [who] can protest against officials who are not accountable or are inefficient. For this role to work, educating youth into citizenship needs to encourage pro-active civic engagement". The term pro-

active is pertinent here, youth citizens in the World Bank's thinking (evidenced in the Development Report 2006 and the Coursera MOOC) are youthful active citizens who pro-actively seek opportunities to engage with and support state development aims and goals over sustained periods (see Cisse, 2015). These individuals do so within invited spaces – they are supportive (pro) of active citizen engagements but do not engage with nor support disruptive citizen engagements.

**Conclusions**

At the heart of *Engaging Citizens* lies the idea that citizen engagement is a crucial component for development, not only as integral to the participatory turn in development but as an antidote to declining civic participation and extensive levels of mistrust towards governments. This drive towards citizen engagement is far from unproblematic, not only in terms of the political ideology and framing of the discourses and practices of engagement that are encouraged, but also for the ways in which these efforts cross scales and boundaries of citizenship and belonging (see also Staeheli et al. 2016). While online training and networking spaces facilitate connections with disparate audiences across the globe, these audiences remain partial – primarily well-educated, urban and middle-class or elites due to issues of language, literacy, cost and technology access. The message reaching these audiences then reflected the alignment of the MOOC with the World Bank carried specific connotations and expectations, inculcating specific agendas and ideologies around good governance, the responsibilisation of citizens and the role of civil society.

The promotion of 'engaged citizens' within the MOOC can be read as indicative of broader trends to promote forms and practices and citizenship which promote responsibilisation of citizens aligned with a gradual depoliticisation of society. Thus, we see how invented spaces for and disruptive forms of (citizen) claims-making – akin to Isin's (2008) notion of acts of citizenship – are marginalised and discouraged. Instead, engaged citizens – and by association, civil society – are located as collaborative with rather than confrontational towards government practices, even when manifestations of liberal politics and neoliberal economics hinder rather than promote social justice and development. Instead of becoming engaged to make claims to rights, citizens were encouraged to participate in and develop sanctioned (formalised) spaces of engagement beyond the traditional realm of the ballot box. These alternative spaces of engagement – the social audit, community budget monitoring – sit between acts and actions of citizenship: they may not be requested arenas of participation by the government, but are accepted and increasingly formalised into civil, non-disruptive activities. While championed as mechanisms to achieve development and good governance, the positioning of citizen engagement as increasingly in collaboration with the

government and a set of civil activities reflects both a neoliberal drift in education policies, a continued responsibilisation of citizenship, *and* as decreasingly politicised.

Engaged citizens are, through these educational endeavours, discouraged from critical engagements with structural inequalities. Instead, through a globalised citizenship agenda, these citizens are asked to become responsible not only for themselves (as being healthy, wealthy and wise) or to the government (as law-abiding, active citizens), but *for* government (as being effective, efficient and accountable). This last responsibility is crucial, reflecting the simultaneous awareness of the need for state institutions *and* the distrust of and efforts to limit the scope of these institutions inherent within the market-orientated politics of the World Bank and others. Thus, engaged citizens are envisaged as the agents responsible for promoting and policing ideals of good governance and, through this, improving service delivery and development outcomes from state institutions. The engaged citizen is therefore not a claims-making agent disrupting the status-quo, but an individual undertaking (civil) activities of citizenship to promote good governance.

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